

Public pays price for arms lobbyists

The Washington Post _____
 The New York Times _____
 The Washington Times _____
 The Wall Street Journal _____
 The Christian Science Monitor _____
 New York Daily News _____
 USA Today _____
 The Chicago Tribune _____
ST. ALBANS MESSENGER
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Vermont eyes popped open when former CIA Director William Colby came to the state to campaign for a Town Meeting ballot item that called for a 50 percent reduction in defense spending.

After all, here is the nation's former top spook talking about eliminating a good share of the agency's fuel. It would be akin to a politician announcing that the next campaign would be run without sound bites.

Colby's point, of course, is that we have no enemy and our present defense needs can be met at half our present cost. But it is more than that. He talks about the basic need to restructure the defense industry in a way that reflects true need.

His point was made nicely this week in the on-going battle at Lockheed to see which group of individuals runs one of the nation's largest arms companies. In a full page ad in the New York Times the four leading pictures of one slate of candidates included one politician and three former defense officials. They were: Hans Mark, former Secretary of the Air Force and former deputy administrator of NASA, Gen. Earl T. O'Loughlin, former commander of the Air Force, Sen. John Tower, the embattled nominee for defense secretary, and Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, former Chief of Naval Operations and a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

This company is trying to sell more than expertise, they are trying to sell access, they are trying to sell political influence. These people do not know the first thing about running a major corporation, but what they do know is how to grease the skids so that Lockheed would have the inside track on upcoming defense contracts.

That is how the game works. This is what Colby and other correct-thinking people object to. Instead of decisions being based on need, they are being based on influence, hype and fear. Every major arms company has essentially the same array of former generals and politicians who have been paid to turn lobbyists. These are the people who know the skeletons. They know the histories of past deals and which buttons to push. They get their phone calls returned. They sound credible to their former buddies in Congress.

As we are learning, the taxpayers have paid a heavy price for such influence and have gotten very little in return as far as a national defense that meets our changing needs.

Unfortunately, we will see more of this. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev has single-handedly put the world's defense industry in a tail spin. For the arms industry, peace is not prosperity. There are not enough contracts to go around, just look at what has happened to General Electric in Burlington. Competition for contracts will become fierce and political influence will become the cutting edge.

There are laws that prevent members of Congress and their staffs from immediately leaving their public jobs and joining the industries they used to regulate. They have to wait a year or so. It is a minimal requirement for such an incestuous practice. It should be forever.

by Emerson Lynn